


State expands plan to add toll lanes on I-55

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Mary Wisniewski

Interstate 55 at rush hour is a great place to listen to an audiobook of “War and Peace.”

But it’s not so great if you want to get home on time. I-55 offers one of the worst commutes in the Midwest and sees 12 hours of daily congestion, with four crashes a day, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation.

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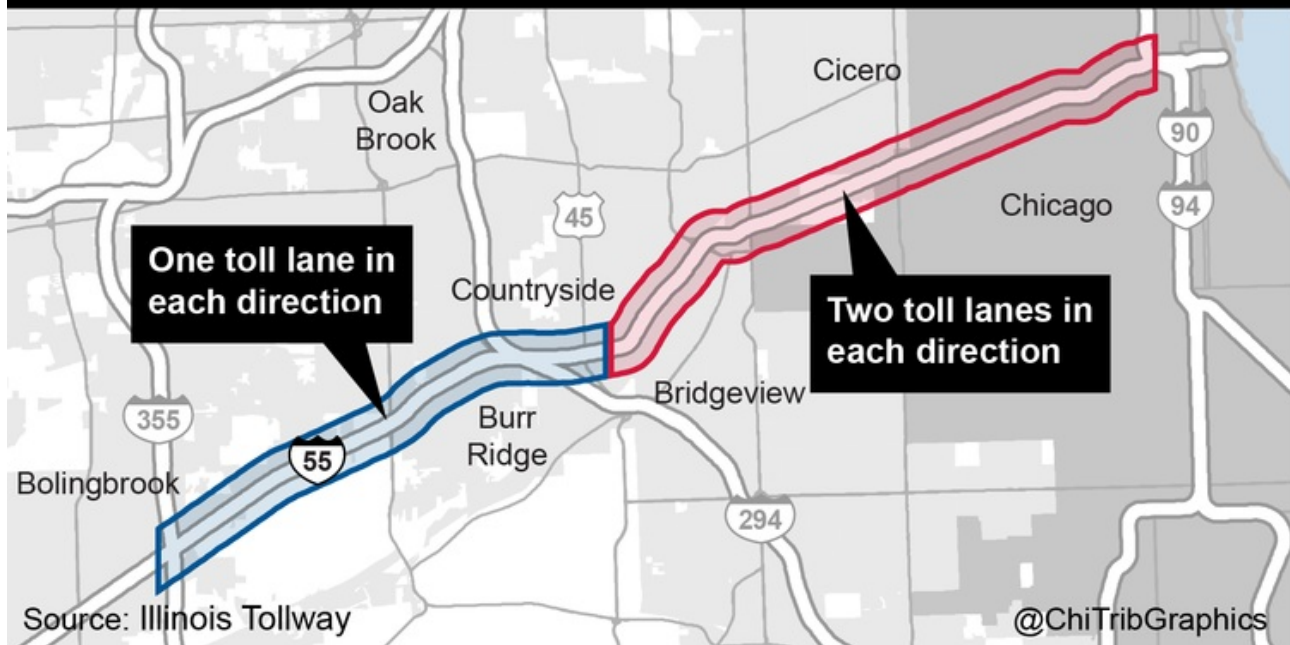
To combat congestion on the Stevenson Expressway, Gov. Bruce Rauner and IDOT last year proposed adding one express toll lane in each direction for the 25-mile stretch between I-355 and I-90/94, to be built by private companies. The stretch starts at Bolingbrook and touches such southwest suburbs as Burr Ridge, Hodgkins and Summit, plus Chicago’s Southwest Side.

IDOT has now upped the ante and proposes having two new toll lanes in each direction from I-90/94 in the city to I-294, with one toll lane in each direction from I-294 to I-355.

The new plan would be more attractive to developers, who could pay for all or part of the construction through a public-private partnership, which would have to be approved by the Illinois General Assembly, explained IDOT project manager Steve Schilke. The Assembly never voted on the initial, one-lane proposal. The Illinois Tollway would have the right of first refusal on the project.

The new lanes would go into the shoulder area to the left of traffic and into the center median. The additional lanes would not take up any more of the right-of-way for I-55, so it would not intrude on private property, Schilke said. Some widening would be needed at places where the roadway curves, to make sure sightlines are safe, but this would still be within the existing right-of-way, he said.

PROPOSED TOLL LANES ON I-55



The cost would be about \$700 million, up from the \$425 million estimate for having just one lane in each direction.

Schilke and other IDOT officials explained the concept to visitors at a public meeting last week at Toyota Park in Bridgeview, home of the Chicago Fire soccer team.

The new lanes would be tolled for all users except Pace buses, which would go on the lanes free. Pace currently has a popular bus-on-the-shoulder route along I-55.

Trucks would not be allowed on toll lanes, which would be separated from the outside free lanes by pavement striping. The goal for traffic speeds on the toll lanes would be about 45 mph, still lower than the speed limit but faster than current rush hour traffic, according to IDOT. Schilke did not know how much the tolls might be, but IDOT wants travelers to be able to use their I-Pass transponders, whether the Tollway or some private operator manages the system.

Schilke said IDOT considered using the shoulder for a new non-toll lane for all users, but decided it would not solve the congestion problem and would make things tougher for Pace buses, which would have to come off the shoulder and into regular traffic.

“Managed lanes are becoming more popular throughout the country because managed lanes really temper congestion,” Schilke said. Traffic on I-55 rose between 14 to 28 percent between 2000 and 2016, consistent with regional population and economic growth patterns, said IDOT spokeswoman Gianna Urgo.

IDOT has to conduct another environmental review of the project, now that a portion of the project calls for two lanes in each direction instead of one, and will have another public meeting next spring. If everything is approved, the agency could start looking for contractors in 2019, Urgo said. The project could be completed in 18 to 24 months, so it could be finished in 2021.

Not everyone's crazy about the idea. Ron Burke, executive director of the Active Transportation Alliance, which advocates for bicyclists, pedestrians and public transit, expressed concern that bigger highways would just contribute to more sprawl and more jobs far from where people live.

"It contributes to development patterns that are not conducive to biking, walking and (public) transit," Burke said. "It makes it more difficult for people who can't afford a car or can't drive a car to get around." He said more traffic crashes happen with more cars on the road.

There is also an equity concern. Combinations of free and toll lanes are already used in areas like Seattle, Atlanta and Miami, but toll lanes are sometimes referred to as "Lexus" lanes, reflecting the idea that wealthier people can just shell out the cash to speed up their commute.

The Metropolitan Planning Council, a Chicago-based public research group, has supported development of one toll lane in each direction on I-55 since 2010. But Transportation Director Audrey Wennink said MPC would support two lanes in each direction only if they fit in the existing median and shoulder space without adding to the right-of-way, as IDOT is proposing, and if one of the two lanes were just for public transit.

"The current situation of operating buses on a highway shoulder would benefit from an upgrade to an express lane where buses could operate at even faster speeds and even more buses could be added to respond to increasing demand for this type of service," Wennink said.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which oversees land use and transportation planning for the region, supports IDOT's effort to implement toll lanes on I-55. Executive Director Joe Szabo cautioned that any public-private arrangement would need to be "carefully structured to protect the public interest."

A frequent I-55 user said the idea of two new lanes in each direction seemed "pretty solid."

John Martinez, 53, a Chicago fireman from the Garfield Ridge neighborhood, said he knows it's going to be a bad morning if he sees traffic backed up on Central Avenue from the expressway on-ramp all the way to his house near 52nd Street. If toll lanes on I-55 would alleviate that pressure, he's all for it.

"Chicagoans are a little hesitant to change, but this is the future," said Martinez, who came to last week's public meeting.

He said he thought the idea that those who could pay the toll would get better traffic is "kind of classist," but he hoped that traffic going into toll lanes would ease congestion in the free lanes.

“If a lot of people aren’t using these (free lanes), I’ll be flying,” Martinez said.

Another Chicago resident at the meeting, retired postal worker Steven Bahnsen, was more skeptical.

“My concern is if there’s an accident, there’s no shoulder,” Bahnsen said. “And where do you put the snow?”

IDOT plans show narrow 3.5 foot shoulders to the left of the proposed new lanes, though there would still be 12-foot shoulders to the right of the free lanes.

New year, new Ventra cards

About 180,000 CTA customers have a little job to do before the New Year — get a new Ventra card.

Ventra cards expire after four years, and the first batch issued when the CTA started the card electronic payment system in 2013 will expire Dec. 31. The rest of the cards expire through 2022, depending on when they were purchased. The CTA has been reminding customers about expiring cards through ads on buses, on trains and in stations.

If you have registered your card, this will not be a hassle — Ventra will tell you by email two months in advance that your card is expiring, and you will get another one in the mail. You can register your card at ventrachicago.com with your current address, and a new card will be mailed to you for free.

If you have already registered your Ventra card but have moved, be sure Ventra has your current address.

Also, starting Monday, Dec. 18, the CTA will start issuing cards with a new design inspired by the “V” in Ventra with inverted triangles in a pattern of different shades of blue. The CTA said this is a nod to Lake Michigan — it also looks like the back of a playing card.

The new cards will work like the old cards, except they will no longer offer the prepaid debit account feature that was an option when the system launched four years ago that allowed customers to use the cards for both riding the “L” and buying things. The CTA decided there was not enough demand for this, in part because of other prepaid debit products and electronic payment options such as Apple Pay.

If you have money on the debit portion of the card, either spend it down, arrange to transfer the funds to a new prepaid debit card offered by Money Network or have the money refunded via check.

It was that prepaid option that makes the cards expire when they do, by the way. Bank cards usually expire after about four years, due to security features, explained CTA spokeswoman Tammy Chase. The new Ventra cards, which do not have this feature, can last 20 years.

There are currently 2 million Ventra cards in active use, Chase said.

Card expiration is just another reason for registering your Ventra card. Registration also allows you to get back the \$5 spent on the card, and protects balances in case the card is lost or stolen. The Tribune has reported that CTA riders lost out on more than \$16 million in refunds by failing to register their cars, according to transit agency records.

Transportation song quiz

Last week's song was a chart topper about meeting at a train station, before a long, maybe permanent, separation. The performers were uncharitably labeled the "Pre-Fab Four." The song was "Last Train to Clarksville" by The Monkees. David Eldridge of Evanston was first with the answer.

This week's song describes how a Detroit assembly line worker puts together his own Cadillac very, very slowly, with the help of some friends and a big lunch box. What's the song, and who performed it? The winner gets Tribune notebooks and baseball cards.

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